

CSI CLOSE TO HOME?



Laura Sudkamp

EDUCATION

Bachelor's Degree in chemistry from UK

HOMETOWN

Lexington

FAMILY

Husband of 22 years; Two children: Nathan, a freshman with the US Merchant Marine Academy who is earning his degree in maritime systems engineering, minoring in nuclear engineering; and, Emily, a senior at Franklin County High School who will be studying pre-pharmacy at UK next year.

PROFESSIONAL

Serves on a number of professional national boards

THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE PROOF

Ever wondered if the popular CSI dramas are for real? "Not really," says Laura Sudkamp, a 23-year veteran of the Kentucky State Police Forensic Laboratory. "In real life, law enforcement, detectives and the lab work independently of each other. We would never interrogate or chase suspects, work a case and then come into the lab. Our job is to read the science without bias."

Sudkamp grew up during the *Quincy* era and knew she wanted to work in forensics at a young age. She participated in the Explorer Programs under the University of Kentucky Police Department, where she learned to direct traffic at football games and concerts, and gained her first knowledge of law enforcement. It was there she discovered her lack of patience with the lawless, and turned her sights elsewhere. Soon after, she was granted a tour of a crime lab and was hooked. She began her career as a college intern at the lab and worked her way up the forensic ladder.

As lab director, Sudkamp oversees 69 employees and more than 130 who work throughout the state. The only crime lab in Kentucky, they support 450 agencies, including the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF). In 2011, the lab received 38,000 cases. "It's my job to ensure the quality of the lab work, resolve any issues, and anticipate the future of

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our science. When you consider the impact of our work, it's a lot of responsibility. There are a lot of sleepless nights."

The majority of the lab's cases involve toxicology testing (drug and alcohol levels), but they also examine items for controlled substances, perform DNA testing, complete firearms assessments, compare tool marks (tire tracks, footprints or other impressions), and complete trace analysis (hair, fiber, residue, soil comparisons, etc.). The lab also maintains a forensic biology database, a searchable database that stores DNA profiles of all convicted felons.

Sudkamp tries to support her employees with the right equipment, supplies and funding. "I try to give them the tools, and let them do their job." As a facilitator between the analysts, headquarters and prosecutors, she serves as a "buffer" to help the process run smoothly. And "There's no room for bad science," she says. Analysts review the data reports from the lab to check for typos. "Our findings have huge implications and they have to be correct."

Along with the burden of proof comes the burden of stress. A backlog of cases is constant. "Sometimes we feel guilty for going on vacation or not working on the weekend, knowing that families are waiting on lab results. There are times when personal plans can't be met because you've been subpoenaed to court." Even after retirement, the subpoenas continue. "One lady retired four years ago and is still getting subpoenaed!" Sudkamp said.

And then there are the calls in the middle of the night. "You know when the phone rings that someone has lost someone. That's hard." But there's also a tremendous feeling of accomplishment "when you can help solve crimes, bring relief to families, and get drugs and drunk drivers off the street, you know you're making a difference."

"I think we all have one or two cases that stick with us," Sudkamp said. Hers is a 1989 unsolved homicide case involving a teenage girl. She worked the case as an intern. After talking with the prosecutor about a year ago, the case has been reopened and evidence is being resubmitted. "I'm hoping for closure soon. That would make my career."

